

Nutritional politics

Many [children have died of malnutrition in India](#) and yet Women and Child Development Ministers over the years haven't decided what food to give children in anganwadis. This is worrying. How many more children must suffer from stunted growth before the Minister in charge of their welfare decides on whether to serve them hot-cooked nutritious meals or packaged/processed fortified mixes? And why does there have to be a choice between the two? Why can't India incorporate both? Is it really that difficult to keep a close watch on the quality of food served to children between the ages of three and six as well as take-home ration for pregnant and lactating women?

India struggling to cut malnutrition rates: reports

Apparently, it is. If you put together the years of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government and the Bharatiya Janata Party government, no solution is in sight after more than a decade of discussions. The Minister of Women and Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, and her predecessor, Renuka Chowdhury, have always exercised the easy option: dense, fortified food for malnourished children, courtesy the manufacturers. But early this month, Ms. Gandhi locked horns with her own officials on arriving at a solution. While her officers are batting for take-home rations that are locally available and processed, Ms. Gandhi favours a quickly served, nutrients-fortified alternative. It is an old debate; one that involves big biscuit-makers and assorted corn puff manufacturers on the one hand and social activists on the other, with children caught in between.

Data on malnutrition should serve as a wake-up call for the government: 38% of children are stunted and 35.7% are underweight in India. About 21% of children under the age of five are wasted (low weight for height), according to the National Family Health Survey-4 data.

Unequal by birth: time to break the vicious cycle

Eight years ago, when malnutrition deaths occurred in some districts in Maharashtra, a simple solution involving a protein-rich diet called Lapsi — a green millet mixture combined with water and milk — was given to malnourished babies. In Jharkhand, dry rations such as oil, dal, wheat or rice were given to mothers — until the contractor lobby forced the government to shift in favour of processed food.

The point is to address malnourishment through locally produced, diverse food options that the country offers. Under the UPA government, the Minister in charge wondered aloud in 2007 about who would keep a watch on the quality of meals served. She asked what would happen if something fell into the food being cooked. "Can we keep a close watch? Why not serve packaged food?" This is a valid point of concern, but is it impossible to work out a solution? Or is there no solution because children cannot be quantified as vote banks?

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